first major engagement of the Civil War would be fought on the property that Clingman had recently acquired in the Old Dominion.[25]

Although Clingman's antebellum mining ventures ultimately proved unprofitable, they are nonetheless indicative of the role he believed Northern capital and technological expertise would play in the development of the economic resources of the South. Unlike other fire eaters such as Edmund Ruffin of Virginia, Clingman was entirely devoid of anti-Yankee animus in his business relationships. He willingly entered into partnerships with Northerners like Van Dyke and served on the board of directors for Northern-controlled corporations. Even as it became evident that the nation was splitting apart over the slavery issue, Clingman continued to maintain a national vision of economic development. Regardless of whether the South remained in the Union, the key to its future, in his view, lay in Northern investment.

While it is convenient for purposes of analysis to separate Clingman's role as "the most avid of the region's many commercial boosters" from his career as a politician, his achievements as an explorer, scientist, and propagandist undoubtedly redounded to his political benefit. As John C. Inscoe has pointed out, Clingman's long-standing goal of "creating a new south by developing both untapped natural resources and commercial prospects" was one that all "entrepreneurially oriented mountain residents would recognize as desirable" regardless of their opinions on partisan politics or Southern Rights. Clingman's hold on the voters of the mountain district thus rested on factors that proved to be even more tenacious than party loyalty. In the words of one admiring contemporary, he "stole the affections and hearts of the people and kept them . . . in his explorations for mineral[s] and lofty mountain peaks."[26]

Although Clingman's endeavors as one of "western North Carolina's first and most prolific individual publicity men" won him many admirers, not all westerners gave unqualified approval to his efforts to develop the region's rich mineral resources. Some, at least, were concerned about what today would be called "environmental impact." With a passion that compensated for his infelicitous grammar and spelling, one mountaineer in Cherokee County complained that Clingman and his associates were "destroying all of the timber & a digging up all the small flats that might be made tolerable good little farms. . . . They are a doing great damage to the Lands & to myself. . . . If men that holde a hig[h]er office than I do are allowed to do as they do, some of us will have to leave the State."[27]

Clingman's political enemies were not averse to exploiting such issues for partisan advantage. As his editorial spokesman Thomas W. Atkin indignantly complained, "Mr. Clingman cannot even pursue a scientific investigation—measure a mountain or test a gold mine—but it brings down upon his head a whole torrent of mean and malevolent abuse." Clingman's protracted debate with Elisha Mitchell over who had been the first to identify, ascend, and measure the highest peak in the Black Mountains of Yancey County provides the most cogent example

of how partisanship could transform a seemingly nonpolitical issue like "measuring a mountain" into a controversy with important political ramifications.[28]

The dispute, which culminated in Mitchell's death in 1857, was doubly tragic insofar as it destroyed the friendship of two men who had been close for more than twenty-five years. Accounts of the Clingman-Mitchell controversy have typically portrayed it as a needless and "unmannerly" debate between a "gentle, shy scientist" and a "congenital disputant" envious of the "fame [that] came to Dr. Mitchell" as the discoverer of the highest mountain east of the Mississippi.[29]

There is a grain of truth in that assessment. Clingman's large ego and disputatious personality sometimes did embroil him in needless controversy, and his unfortunate break with his scientific mentor Mitchell in some ways paralleled his earlier estrangement from his political mentor William A. Graham. In this case, however, Clingman did not go out of his way to stir up controversy. Indeed, he entered into a public debate with his former professor with great reluctance and only after he felt compelled by political necessity to do so.

Mitchell's claim to have ascended the highest peak in the Black Mountains rested on two visits to the region made nine years apart. During the summer of 1835 he had taken measurements confirming that the range contained several peaks higher than those in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, which had previously been regarded as the highest mountains east of the Mississippi. Accompanied by two guides, he ascended what he then considered to be the highest point. Mitchell returned to the Black Mountains in 1844 and measured another mountain that he believed was even higher than the one he had climbed nine years earlier. His claim remained unchallenged until September 1855, when Clingman ascended a peak that he calculated to be almost two hundred feet higher than the one three miles to the south known as Mount Mitchell.

Clingman related his findings to Joseph Henry of the Smithsonian Institution, who submitted the congressman's communication to the *Washington City Spectator,* along with some introductory remarks in which Henry referred to the point as "Clingman's Peak." The following year, the communication was published in the Smithsonian's annual report. A new introduction by Henry cited recent measurements by Arnold Guyot substantiating the claim that Clingman's Peak was more than one hundred feet higher than Mount Mitchell.[30]

Mitchell never challenged Clingman's assertion that the mountain he measured in 1855 was in fact the highest point east of the Mississippi. Rather, the controversy centered on the identity of the peak that Mitchell had ascended in 1844. The scientist denied that he had ever "measured, ascended, or even approached nearer than two miles" the point local residents had named Mount Mitchell. Instead, he claimed the mountain he had visited in 1844 was the same one Clingman had ascended in 1855.[31]

Mitchell was correct in contending that he had preceded Clingman to the high-

est peak. However, he did not reach it in 1844, as he believed, but during his earlier visit to the Black Mountains in 1835. The mountain he measured nine years later was most likely Mount Gibbes—part of a three-knob complex that also included the point known as Mount Mitchell. Ironically, the difference in the physical features and vegetation of the two mountains he had ascended led Mitchell to conclude, mistakenly, that his guides had led him to the wrong peak during his first visit. Thus, when the controversy began in 1855, he focused his arguments on the 1844 visit, thereby setting himself up for Clingman's successful rebuttal.[32]

At the time he wrote his public letter to Henry, Clingman did not realize Mitchell would take exception to his claim to have discovered a mountain even higher than the one his former professor had ascended a decade earlier. Instead, he was proceeding on the common-sense assumption that the peak at the southern end of the range, which by then was generally called Mount Mitchell, was the same point Mitchell himself regarded as the highest. He must, therefore, have been flabbergasted to read the letter Mitchell wrote Henry in November 1855, in which the scientist declared that local residents had made "a mistake" in attaching his name to the peak three miles south of the highest point.[33]

Mitchell had requested Henry to show the letter to Clingman and secure his consent prior to its publication. The scientist evidently expected that his friend would withdraw his claim to priority once he realized that his central premise—that Mitchell had ascended the peak known as Mount Mitchell—was invalid. Indeed, had Mitchell been content merely to assert that Clingman's account of the mountain he had measured in 1855 was consistent with the location and features of the one he had ascended eleven years earlier, the congressman might have relented. However, Mitchell presented Henry with a detailed description of the mountain he had climbed in 1844 that came much closer to fitting Mount Gibbes and the other peaks in the three-knob complex than it did the mountain Clingman had recently measured. Wishing to avoid embarrassing his friend, Clingman urged him to revisit the range and refamiliarize himself with its features before pursuing the matter further.[34]

Until the spring of 1856, Clingman and Mitchell both hoped that their differences would not evolve into a public quarrel. Yet each also apparently expected the other to retreat from his position once all the facts were fully understood. Mitchell decided not to publish his November 1855 letter to Henry and told Clingman that he intended, instead, to write an article for the *North Carolina University Magazine*. The congressman evidently found that plan acceptable, and Mitchell sent the new manuscript to him for examination. Although the scientist modified some of the details of his argument in light of Clingman's criticisms, he refused to back down from his central claim. Moreover, for reasons that he never explained, he announced his intention to publish his article in the rabidly anti-Clingman *Asheville Spectator*. Clingman tried unsuccessfully to dissuade his

friend from that course of action. If Mitchell persisted, he warned, he would be obliged to respond in kind, since he expected to "be attacked by my political enemies probably, to operate on the canvass . . . going on in the State."[35]

Even under the best of circumstances, Mitchell's decision to bring his quarrel with Clingman to public attention might have generated ill feeling between the two men. But it was his determination to publish his side of the case in the partisan *Spectator* that transformed a scientific controversy into a bruising political "bear fight."[36] The political ramifications of the controversy between Clingman and Mitchell become more salient when it is remembered that their newspaper debate, which began in June 1856 and ended in November, coincided exactly with the presidential election campaign. Clingman realized that his chances of winning the Democratic senatorial nomination in 1858 would be greatly improved if he could deliver the mountain district to Buchanan in 1856. Any issue that impaired his own credibility and standing among his constituents would necessarily have an adverse impact on the outcome and, consequently, on his prospects for political advancement.

The controversy began in earnest on 19 June 1856 with the publication of the first of four communications by Mitchell. The letter, which differed substantially from the draft he had shown to Clingman, recounted the details of his first visit to the Black Mountains in order to demonstrate that he had correctly located the peak that was "rediscovered by Mr. Clingman last year, and represented by him as being before unknown." Mitchell's communication proved, at best, that he had identified the highest point from a distance in 1835. He did not discuss his 1844 visit, which was his central bone of contention with Clingman. In an ill-conceived follow-up published a week later, the scientist (who had not visited the Black Mountain region in twelve years) demonstrated shocking ignorance of its geography by claiming that the highest peak lay on the Buncombe-Yancey line—a statement Clingman had no difficulty refuting.[37]

The unpublished rebuttal Clingman had prepared the previous winter in response to Mitchell's letter to Joseph Henry had been respectful, even deferential, in its tone. Once the congressman's political survival instincts had been aroused, however, he came out with both fists swinging. In a long and densely argued communication to the *Asheville News,* which was also published as a sixteen-page pamphlet, he made a compelling case that Mitchell's own evidence "in publications made by him, and in articles *written for publication,* but subsequently withheld," demonstrated that the scientist had actually ascended Mount Gibbes in 1844. He reprinted and summarized passages from Mitchell's letter to Henry and subsequent unpublished letters to make the point that the scientist had repeatedly backtracked from his initial position to meet the succession of objections raised by Clingman. With more than a tinge of sarcasm, he concluded that "these mountain peaks stand boldly and stubbornly, and will not change their outlines to accommodate themselves to his *shifting representations.*"[38]

Most likely, Mitchell was as much put off by the tone of Clingman's pamphlet as he was by its substantive arguments. Although intent on vindicating his claims, the professor had entered the controversy in the spirit of a scientist trying to arrive at the truth, rather than a politician attempting to score debating points against an opponent. Clingman's pamphlet, on the other hand, more closely resembled a campaign tract than a scientific disquisition. While he stopped short of accusing Mitchell of deliberate prevarication, his reference to "shifting representations" did suggest that the scientist was playing fast and loose with the truth. And he certainly gave Mitchell no credit for his willingness to admit to his mistakes and modify his initial hypotheses in light of new evidence presented to him.

Nonetheless, Clingman's strictures were mild compared with the torrent of abuse Mitchell unleashed against his former student in his third communication to the *Spectator,* which was subsequently published as an eight-page pamphlet. The scientist placed the blame for initiating the controversy squarely on Clingman, who had been "inclined to yield" the points at issue until "the apprehension of what his political enemies would say or do, seemed to overcome every other consideration." He also accused Clingman of distorting his own argument by printing letters that had been explicitly withdrawn from publication, by quoting their passages out of context, and by resorting to "the most dishonorable of all methods, *a falsification of the documents on which his argument rests.*" In Mitchell's opinion, such "tricks . . . which correct men scorn to employ" constituted sufficient evidence that Clingman had shown himself "unworthy of being trusted." "The words old friend," he snarled, "do not harmonize with the malignity that characterizes . . . your pamphlet. It is likely to be said in view of the whole, that you do not know what friendship is; that whatever you may claim to feel of that kind, is hollow and pretended, or, if real, is unreliable and worthless."[39]

Mitchell's pamphlet, written in August 1856 after a return visit to the Black Mountains, was the first to deal directly with the crucial 1844 ascent. In support of his claims, he cited the authority of William Riddle, the Yancey County guide who had accompanied him that year. Mitchell, who had not seen Riddle in more than a decade, had hoped to speak to him before returning to Chapel Hill, but poor health forced the scientist to cut short his visit. Thus it was Clingman who had the first opportunity to interview the guide. Riddle's testimony, which the congressman published in the *Asheville News* in October 1856, proved devastating to Mitchell's case. Not only did the guide provide a detailed description of a route of ascent leading directly to the top of Mount Gibbes, but he explicitly denied ever accompanying Mitchell to the summit of the higher peak three miles to the north.[40]

In a communication published in the *Spectator* in November, Mitchell expressed dissatisfaction with Riddle's account but conceded the main point to Clingman by retreating to the position that he had correctly identified the highest peak from a distance in 1835 "though I [may have] failed to reach its top either on

that or any following year." Clingman made no reply to Mitchell's communication, nor did the scientist attempt another publication. Their public debate was over, and Clingman had emerged as the victor. Even Mitchell's colleagues at the university grudgingly acknowledged that "Dr. M. is getting the reputation of being a *'singed cat'*."[41]

The tragic epilogue came in June 1857, when Mitchell once again set out for the Black Mountains. By now the scientist had begun to reevaluate his earlier belief that he had failed to reach the highest peak in 1835, and he intended to interview William Wilson, one of the guides who had accompanied him that year. Setting out alone for Wilson's house on 27 June 1857, he failed to arrive there. A week later, a search party led by "Big Tom" Wilson of Yancey County discovered Mitchell's body in a clear pool at the base of a waterfall. He had apparently lost his footing and drowned.[42]

The controversy did not end with Mitchell's fall from the mountain. It was renewed almost immediately by Charles Phillips, his colleague at the University of North Carolina, and by Zebulon B. Vance, his former student. Vance secured written depositions from William Wilson and Samuel Austin, the two surviving guides from the 1835 visit, that provided persuasive evidence that Mitchell had in fact ascended the highest peak that year. Their testimony, together with other evidence supporting Mitchell's case, was presented to the public in articles written by Phillips and published in the *Asheville Spectator, Raleigh Register,* and other Whig presses.[43]

Clingman responded through letters published in the *Asheville News, Raleigh North Carolina Standard,* and other Democratic newspapers. By the end of 1857, however, he was clearly on the defensive. Instead of defining the terms of the debate, as he had done with Mitchell, he now found himself reacting to the barrage of statements and accusations brought forward by Phillips and Vance. Thomas Atkin of the *Asheville News* expressed indignation at these attempts "to revive the former controversy . . . by taking advantage of the universal sympathy felt on account of Prof. Mitchell's melancholy death . . . [to] make capital against Mr. Clingman." According to Clingman, "disinterested persons" had long ago become "wearied with the clamor which my opponents have kept up." The controversy continued only because "Dr. Mitchell's friends and my political and personal enemies" had combined "to gratify the vanity of the former and the *hostility* of the latter."[44]

Clingman never faced the voters of the mountain district after 1857, and it is difficult to measure the impact of the controversy on his political reputation. By the end of that year, however, most westerners had apparently been persuaded that the congressman's charges against Mitchell were groundless. According to Vance, "a large majority, embracing many of Clingman's warmest friends, [now] profess themselves convinced that Dr M[itchell] was right." Moreover, thanks to the efforts of his "political and personal enemies," the image of Clingman as a

selfish opportunist who provoked a tragic and unnecessary controversy with his former professor had taken hold on the public mind. To some extent, that image has persisted to the present day.[45]

The political repercussions of the controversy became apparent in August 1858 after the special election that was held to fill the congressional seat vacated by Clingman in May. By that time, Zebulon B. Vance, the Whig candidate, had achieved renown in the mountain district as Mitchell's most prominent defender. In addition to securing the testimony that eventually vindicated the scientist's claims, he also played a leading role in the movement to re-inter Mitchell's body on the highest peak. That well-publicized ceremony, which attracted several hundred visitors from across the state, took place on 16 June 1858, just a few weeks before the congressional election.[46]

Nonetheless, Democrat William W. Avery began the campaign as a heavy favorite. The *Asheville News* confidently predicted that his challenger had not "even the shade of a shadow of a chance" of winning. Contrary to that prediction, Vance defeated his rival by more than two thousand votes, carrying two-thirds of the counties and garnering 57 percent of the vote. Since the Democrats won handily in the governor's race and in most of the legislative contests in the mountain region, Vance's victory over Avery must be viewed as a personal, rather than partisan, triumph. Most likely, the favorable publicity generated by his efforts to vindicate the reputation of Elisha Mitchell was an important factor affecting the outcome.[47]

It is impossible to predict whether Clingman himself would have fared any better in a head-on confrontation with Mitchell's champion. Nor is it possible to determine the precise extent to which the Clingman-Mitchell controversy contributed to the decline of Clingman's influence in western North Carolina and to the emergence of Vance as the dominant political figure in that region. The controversy may well have played a role in weakening Clingman's hold on the voters of the mountain district, but the secession crisis of 1860–61 and the resulting Civil War proved to be even more significant factors in bringing about an abrupt end to his remarkable political career.